Britain in the nineteenth century was at its most powerful and self-confident. After the industrial revolution, nineteenth-century Britain was the "workshop" of the world. Until the last quarter of the century British factories were producing more than any other country in the world.

By the end of the century, Britain's empire was political rather than commercial. Britain used this empire to control large areas of the world. The empire gave the British a feeling of their own importance which was difficult to forget when Britain lost its power in the twentieth century. This belief of the British in their own importance was at its height in the middle of the nineteenth century, among the new middle class, which had grown with industrialisation. The novelist Charles Dickens nicely described this national pride. One of his characters, Mr Podsnap, believed that Britain had been specially chosen by God and "considered other countries a mistake".

The rapid growth of the middle class was part of the enormous rise in the population. In 1815 the population was 13 million, but this had doubled by 1871, and was over 40 million by 1914. This growth and the movement of people to towns from the countryside forced a change in the political balance, and by the end of the century most men had the right to vote. Politics and government during the nineteenth century became increasingly the property of the middle class. The aristocracy and the Crown had little power left by 1914.

However, the working class, the large number of people who had left their villages to become factory workers, had not yet found a proper voice.

Britain enjoyed a strong place in European councils after the defeat of Napoleon. Its strength was not in a larger population, as this was half that of France and Austria, and only a little greater than that of Prussia. It lay instead in industry and trade, and the navy which protected this trade.

Britain wanted two main things in Europe: a "balance of power" which would prevent any single nation from becoming too strong, and a free market in which its own industrial and trade superiority would give Britain a clear advantage. It succeeded in the first aim by encouraging the recovery of France, to balance the power of Austria. Further east, it was glad that Russia's influence in Europe was limited by Prussia and the empires of Austria and Turkey. These all shared a border with Russia.

Outside Europe, Britain wished its trading position to be stronger than anyone else's. It defended its interests by keeping ships of its navy in almost every ocean of the world. This was possible because it had taken over and occupied a number of places during the war against Napoleon. These included Mauritius (in the Indian Ocean), the Ionian Islands (in the eastern Mediterranean), Sierra Leone (west Africa), Cape Colony (south Africa), Ceylon, and Singapore.

After 1815 the British government did not only try to develop its trading stations. Its policy now was to control world traffic and world markets to Britain's advantage. Britain did not, however, wish to colonise everywhere. There were many areas in

which it had no interest. But there were other areas, usually close to its own possessions or on important trade routes, which it wished everyone else to leave alone. It was as a result of defending these interests that Britain took over more and more land. Britain's main anxiety in its foreign policy was that Russia would try to expand southwards, by taking over the Slavic parts of Turkey's Balkan possessions, and might reach the Mediterranean. For most of the century, therefore, Britain did its best to support Turkey against Russian expansion. In spite of its power, Britain also felt increasingly anxious about growing competition from France and Germany in the last part of the century. Most of the colonies established in the nineteenth century were more to do with political control than with trading for profit.

The concerns in Europe and the protection of trade routes in the rest of the world guided Britain's foreign policy for a hundred years. It was to keep the balance in Europe in 1838 that Britain promised to protect Belgium against stronger neighbours. In spite of political and economic troubles in Europe, this policy kept Britain from war in Europe for a century from 1815. In fact it was in defence of Belgium in 1914 that Britain finally went to war against Germany.

The danger at home, 1815–32

Until about 1850, Britain was in greater danger at home than abroad. The Napoleonic Wars had turned the nation from thoughts of revolution to the need to defeat the French. They had also hidden the social effects of the industrial revolution. Britain had sold clothes, guns, and other necessary war supplies to its allies' armies as well as its own. At the same time, corn had been imported to keep the nation and its army fed.

All this changed when peace came in 1815. Suddenly there was no longer such a need for factory-made goods, and many lost their jobs. Unemployment was made worse by 300,000 men from Britain's army and navy who were now looking for work. At the same time, the landowning farmers' own income had suffered

because of cheaper imported corn. These farmers persuaded the government to introduce laws to protect locally grown corn and the price at which it was sold. The cost of bread rose quickly, and this led to increases in the price of almost everything. While prices doubled, wages remained the same. New methods of farming also reduced the number of workers on the land.

The general misery began to cause trouble. In 1830, for example, starving farmworkers in the south of England rioted for increased wages. People tried to add to their food supply by catching wild birds and animals. But almost all the woods had been enclosed by the local landlord and new laws were made to stop people hunting animals for food. Many had to choose between watching their family go hungry and risking the severe punishment of those who were caught. A man found with nets in his home could be transported to the new "penal" colony in Australia for seven years. A man caught hunting with a gun or a knife might be hanged, and until 1823 thieves caught entering houses and stealing were also hanged. These laws showed how much the rich feared the poor, and although they were slowly softened, the fear remained.

There were good reasons for this fear. A new poor law in 1834 was intended to improve the help given to the needy. But central government did not provide the necessary money and many people received even less help than before. Now, only those who actually lived in the workhouse were given any help at all. The workhouses were feared and hated. They were crowded and dirty, with barely enough food to keep people alive. The inhabitants had to work from early morning till late at night. The sexes were separated, so families were divided. Charles Dickens wrote about the workhouse in his novels. His descriptions of the life of crime and misery into which poor people were forced shocked the richer classes, and conditions slowly improved.

In order to avoid the workhouse, many looked for a better life in the towns. Between 1815 and 1835 Britain changed from being a nation of country people to a nation mainly of townspeople. In the first thirty years of the nineteenth century, cities

like Birmingham and Sheffield doubled in size, while Manchester, Glasgow and Leeds more than doubled. Several towns close together grew into huge cities with no countryside left in between. The main city areas were northwest England, where the new cotton industry was based, the north Midlands, the area around Glasgow, and south Wales. But although these cities grew fast, London remained the largest. In 1820 London was home for 1.25 million, out of a total British population of about 15 million.

If the rich feared the poor in the countryside, they feared even more those in the fast-growing towns. These were harder to control. If they had been organised, a revolution like that in France might have happened. But they were not organised, and had no leaders. Only a few radical politicians spoke for the poor, but they failed to work in close co-operation with the workers who could have supported them.

Several riots did, however, take place, and the government reacted nervously. In 1819, for example, a large crowd of working people and their families gathered in Manchester to protest against their conditions and to listen to a radical speech in favour of change. Suddenly they were attacked by soldiers on horses. Eleven people were killed and more than one hundred wounded. The struggle between the government, frightened of revolution, and those who wanted change became greater.

Reform

The Whigs understood better than the Tories the need to reform the law in order to improve social conditions. Like the Tories they feared revolution, but unlike the Tories they believed it could only be avoided by reform. Indeed, the idea of reform to make the parliamentary system fairer had begun in the eighteenth century. It had been started by early radicals, and encouraged by the American War of Independence, and by the French Revolution.

The Tories believed that Parliament should represent "property" and the property owners, an idea that is still associated by some with today's

Tory Party. The radicals believed that Parliament should represent the people. The Whigs, or Liberals as they later became known, were in the middle, wanting enough change to avoid revolution but little more.

The Tories hoped that the House of Lords would protect the interests of the property owners. When the Commons agreed on reform in 1830 it was turned down by the House of Lords. But the Tories fell from power the same year, and Lord Grey formed a Whig government. Grey himself had supported the call for reform as a radical in 1792. In 1832 the Lords accepted the Reform Bill, but more because they were frightened by the riots in the streets outside than because they now accepted the idea of reform. They feared that the collapse of political and civil order might lead to revolution.

At first sight the Reform Bill itself seemed almost a political revolution. Scotland's voters increased from 5,000 to 65,000. Forty-one English towns, including the large cities of Manchester, Birmingham and Bradford, were represented in Parliament for the very first time. But there were limits to the progress made. The total number of voters increased by only 50 per cent. The 349 electors of the small town of Buckingham still had as many MPs to represent them as the 4,192 electors of the city of Leeds. And England, with only 54 per cent of the British population, continued to have over 70 per cent of MPs as it had done before. However, in spite of its shortcomings, the 1832 Reform Bill was a political recognition that Britain had become an urban society.

Workers revolt

Since 1824 workers had been allowed to join together in unions. Most of these unions were small and weak. Although one of their aims was to make sure employers paid reasonable wages, they also tried to prevent other people from working in their particular trade. As a result the working classes still found it difficult to act together. Determined employers could still quite easily defeat strikers who refused to work until their pay was improved, and often did so with cruelty and violence. Soldiers

were sometimes used to force people back to work or break up meetings.

In 1834, there was an event of great importance in trade union history. Six farmworkers in the Dorset village of Tolpuddle joined together, promising to be loyal to their "union". Their employer managed to find a law by which they could be punished. A judge had been specially appointed by the government to find the six men guilty, and this he did. In London 30,000 workers and radicals gathered to ask the government to pardon the "Tolpuddle Martyrs". The government, afraid of seeming weak, did not do so until the "martyrs" had completed part of their punishment. It was a bad mistake. Tolpuddle became a symbol of employers' cruelty, and of the working classes' need to defend themselves through trade union strength.

The radicals and workers were greatly helped in their efforts by the introduction of a cheap postage system in 1840. This enabled them to organise themselves across the country far better than before. For one penny a letter could be sent to anyone, anywhere in Britain.

Working together for the first time, unions, workers and radicals put forward a People's Charter in 1838. The Charter demanded rights that are now accepted by everyone: the vote for all adults; the right for a man without property of his own to be an MP; voting in secret (so that people could not be forced to vote for their landlord or his party); payment for MPs, and an election every year (which everyone today recognises as impractical). All of these demands were refused by the House of Commons.

The "Chartists" were not united for long. They were divided between those ready to use violence and those who believed in change by lawful means only. Many did not like the idea of women also getting the vote, partly because they believed it would make it harder to obtain voting rights for all men, and this demand, which had been included in the wording to the very first Charter, was quietly forgotten. But riots and political meetings continued. In 1839 fourteen men were killed by soldiers in a riot in Newport, Wales, and many others sent to one of Britain's colonies as prisoners.

The government's severe actions showed how much it feared that the poor might take power, and establish a republic.

The government was saved partly by the skill of Robert Peel, the Prime Minister of the time. Peel believed that changes should be made slowly but steadily. He was able to use the improved economic conditions in the 1840s to weaken the Chartist movement, which slowly died. In 1846 he abolished the unpopular Corn Law of 1815, which had kept the price of corn higher than necessary. Not only had this made life hard for those with little money, but it had brought their employers, the growing class of industrialists, into conflict with the landlord class.

These industrialists neither wished to pay higher wages, nor employ an underfed workforce. In this way, Peel's decision to repeal the Corn Law was a sign of the way power was passing out of the hands of the eighteenth-century gentry class. These had kept their power in the early years of the nineteenth century. But now power decisively passed into the hands of the growing number of industrialists and traders.

Besides hunger, crime was the mark of poverty. Peel had turned his attention to this problem already, by establishing a regular police force for London in 1829. At first people had laughed at his blue-uniformed men in their top hats. But during the next thirty years almost every other town and county started its own police force. The new police forces soon proved themselves successful, as much crime was pushed out of the larger cities, then out of towns and then out of the countryside. Peel was able to show that certainty of punishment was far more effective than cruelty of punishment.

Britain's success in avoiding the storm of revolution in Europe in 1848 was admired almost everywhere. European monarchs wished they were as safe on their thrones as the British queen seemed to be. And liberals and revolutionaries wished they could act as freely as radicals in Britain were able to do. Britain had been a political model in the eighteenth century, but with the War of Independence in America and revolution in France interest in liberalism and democracy turned to these two countries. Now it moved back to Britain, as a model both of industrial success and of free constitutional government. For much of the nineteenth century Britain was the envy of the world.

Family life

In spite of the greater emphasis on the individual and the growth of openly shown affection, the end of the eighteenth century also saw a swing back to stricter ideas of family life. In part, the close family resulted from the growth of new attitudes to privacy, perhaps a necessary part of individualism. It was also the result of the removal, over a period beginning in the sixteenth century, of the social and economic support of the wider family and village community, which had made family life so

much more public. Except for the very rich, people no longer married for economic reasons, but did so for personal happiness. However, while wives might be companions, they were certainly not equals. As someone wrote in 1800, "the husband and wife are one, and the husband is that one". As the idea of the close family under the "master" of the household became stronger, so the possibility for a wife to find emotional support or practical advice outside the immediate family became more limited. In addition, as the idea of the close family slowly spread down the social order, an increasing number of women found their sole economic and social usefulness ended when their children grew up, a problem that continued into the twentieth century. They were discouraged from going out to work if not economically necessary, and also encouraged to make use of the growing number of people available for domestic service.

This return to authority exercised by the head of the family was largely the result of three things. These were fear of political revolution spreading from France, of social change caused by industrial revolution in Britain, and the influence of the new religious movements of Methodism and Evangelicalism.

One must wonder how much these things reduced the chance of happy family life. Individualism, strict parental behaviour, the regular beating of children (which was still widespread), and the cruel conditions for those boys at boarding school, all worked against it. One should not be surprised that family life often ended when children grew up. As one foreigner noted in 1828, "grown up children and their parents soon become almost strangers". It is impossible to be sure what effect this kind of family life had on children. But no doubt it made young men unfeeling towards their own wives who, with unmarried sisters, were the responsibility of the man of the house. A wife was legally a man's property, until nearly the end of the century.

In spite of a stricter moral atmosphere in Scotland which resulted from the strong influence of the Kirk, Scottish women seem to have continued a stronger tradition of independent attitudes and plain speaking. In 1830 a Scotswoman called for "the perfect equality of her sex to that of man". Another in 1838 wrote, "It is the right of every woman to have a vote . . . in her county, and more so now that we have got a woman [Queen Victoria] at the head of government." She had a long time to wait.